Buddhist Festivals & Retreats Summary Sheet

(Pages 62-63 in the Buddhism textbook)

This summary sheet is to help you learn about Buddhist festivals and retreats. According to the AQA specification you need to know the following things:

‘• Festivals and retreats and their importance to Buddhists in Great Britain today, including the celebrations, origins and significance of:

• Wesak  
• Parinirvana Day.’

Some terminology is obvious in meaning but in the exam you will be asked to give definitions of words so that is why such key terms are laid out below. As always, try to be very clear in your mind on the differences between Theravada and Mahayana traditions. Making a table of these will help you.

Terminology

**Dhamma**  - the teaching of the Buddha

**festival** - a day or period of celebration for religious reasons

**Gotama Buddha** - Prince Siddartha Gotama who began the religion of Buddhism (as opposed to other Buddhas like Amitabha Buddha)

**Parinirvana Day** - a Mahayana festival that commemorates Buddha’s passing away

**puja** - worship

**retreat** - a period of time spent away from everyday life in order to focus on meditation practice

**solemn** - serious

**tradition**  - 1. a custom or practice that is handed down from one generation to another; 2. a religious denomination/branch of a religion, e.g. Pure Land or Theravada

**Vassa** - ‘Buddhist Lent’ - a period of three months in the rainy season when monks focus on their religion

**vihara** - a Buddhist monastery

**Wesak** - a Theravada festival that celebrates the Buddha’s birth, enlightenment and passing away

Festivals & retreats

**Festivals** are a normal part of most religions. They are often a time for joy and celebration but Parinirvana day is a solemn, reflective occasion. Some festivals are only celebrated in a **certain country**. Other festivals are only celebrated in **one particular tradition**. Some Mahayana festivals celebrate the **birthdays** of certain **Bodhisattvas**. Major festivals tend to celebrate **events in Gotama Buddha’s life** such as his first sermon after enlightenment (Asalha Puja Day in Theravada).

In **Britain** Buddhism is fairly new so they will follow traditions celebrated in Asian countries where the religion came from. If a British Buddhist has ancestry from Thailand, for example, they may follow the traditions of Thai Buddhism (Theravada). A British Buddhist of non-Asian descent may adopt the customs of the particular type of Buddhism that they have chosen to follow or they might celebrate a general mixture of festivals from different types of Buddhism.

**Festivals are important** because:

1. they help Buddhists to remember important events in the life of Gotama Buddha;
2. they remind Mahayana Buddhists of the example set by Bodhisattvas;
3. they are times when the community will come together;
4. they remind people of Buddha’s teachings.

Retreats

Retreats provide an opportunity for Buddhists in the UK to **get away** from the busyness and temptations of life and spend a day, a week or more in a peaceful, **Buddhist environment**, such as a vihara. This allows them to **focus on the Dhamma**, meditation, puja, etc. There may also be lectures, study and social time with other Buddhists.

Theravada monks observe the season of **Vassa** which lasts three months in the rainy season when they stay in the monastery the whole time and dedicate themselves to study and meditation. In some South East Asian countries, boys are sent to a vihara during the school holidays to practice Buddhism.

Retreats are **important** because:

1. they provide a **break** from a busy life;
2. they help Buddhists to **focus on their religion**;
3. Buddhists can **spend time with each other**.

Wesak

**Significance:** Wesak is a festival that celebrates three things: 1. Buddha’s **birth**; 2. his **enlightenment**; 3. his **parinirvana** (when an enlightened one dies and goes into a state or nibbana). It is the most important and most famous Buddhist festival.

**Origins:** It seems to have started in the early 1900s and only became a public holiday in some countries (not Britain) from the 1950s.

**Celebrations:** The festival is the day of the full moon in May.

1. In homes:
   1. **Decorations** put up;
   2. Lanterns and **candles**;
2. Local vihara:
   1. **Offerings** to Buddha;
   2. People give **gifts** to the monks;
   3. Monks lead people in **worship**.
3. Different countries:
   1. Singapore: **caged birds** released to symbolise release from wrong-doings;
   2. Indonesia: **paper lanterns** float up at night to symbolise: i. **enlightenment** and ii. knowledge **overcoming ignorance**.

Parinirvana Day

**Significance:** Parinirvana Day is a festival in Mahayana that remembers Gotama Buddha’s **dying** and passing into **parinirvana**. It is a time to reflect on one’s future death and on anicca (impermanence).

**Celebrations:** The festival takes place in February.

1. People are very **solemn** on this day.
2. They **reflect** on:
   1. Buddha’s **death** story;
   2. deceased **relatives** and friends;
   3. their **own future death** and impermanence.
3. There are readings from *Mahaparinirvana* *Sutra*, a holy book that describes Buddha’s last days.
4. People come together for **puja** in temples and viharas.
5. **Retreats**.
6. **Pilgrimage** to Kushinagar in India where Buddha died.

Possible Exam Questions

Explain the difference between a festival and a retreat. (4 marks)

Explain two ways in which light is used at the festival of Wesak. (4 marks)

Explain two ways in which belief in impermanence is shown on Parinirvana Day. In your answer you must refer to scripture. (5 marks)

‘Religious festivals are just an excuse to have a good time and nothing more.’ (12 marks)